

Extremism without ideology

Quassim Cassam^{1*} **Received:** July 6, 2026 | **Accepted:** July 8, 2026 | **Published:** July 9, 2026 | **Edited by:** Jonas R. Kunst & Milan Obaidi

¹University of Warwick. Please address correspondence to Quassim Cassam, q.cassam@warwick.ac.uk, Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom This article is published under the Creative Commons BY 4.0 license. Users are allowed to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. © The Author(s).

A response to Horgan and Shayler's account of salad bar extremism. They represent salad bar extremism as ideological but new forms of extremism are less concerned with ideology than with violence for its own sake. Extremists in this sense are fixated on violence, which some of them regard as non-instrumentally valuable. This type of extremism finds no place in Horgan and Shayler's taxonomy.

Keywords: extremism, fixation, ideology, terrorism, violence

A 'salad bar' extremist is a person who assembles a mishmash of different ideologies, but whose primary interest is in committing acts of violence. In their scholarly and illuminating discussion of this phenomenon, Horgan and Shayler (2026) come to two main conclusions: that salad bar extremism is not as novel as is commonly supposed and the 'salad bar' terminology is unhelpful because it is imprecise and conceptually dubious (p. 13). However, although they caution against a "preoccupation with the content of ideologies as opposed to how they function as a process" (p. 14), they end by proposing a taxonomy that is itself preoccupied with the content of ideologies. Although their taxonomy is, in many ways, useful, it takes no account of extremists whose extremism is not in any substantive sense ideological.

When individuals "present with multiple ideologies" (p. 15), Horgan and Shayler (2026) propose the following two questions as a starting point:

1. Is there evidence of mixing ideological content?
2. Is there evidence of migrating from one ideology to another?

In either case, the ideologies in question can be convergent or divergent, which leaves us with this taxonomy: Mixing-Convergent, Migrating-Convergent, Mixing-Divergent, Migrating Divergent. However, the salad bar extremists described by then-FBI Director Christopher Wray (Threats to the Homeland, 2020) include some for whom ideological commitment – even to different ideologies – is not a significant factor. In Wray's pithy formulation, what these cases are really about is the violence, and the function of ideology is to justify or rationalize the forms of violence to which some extremists are drawn by considerations that are far from ideological.

In the most extreme cases, to which I wish to draw attention here, ideology drops out of consideration altogether. There are individuals

whose extremism is *non*-ideological, but who are still recognizable as extremists. In these cases – assuming that they are conceptually possible – we are not dealing with people with multiple ideologies, so Horgan and Shayler's two questions are irrelevant. Even in cases where there *is* an ideological component, but where ideology plays a secondary role, the danger of focusing on the content of a person's ideology or ideologies is that it diverts attention away from the key issue: that ideological commitment is not their primary driver. If this is right then prior to asking Horgan and Shayler's two questions, we should ask whether we are dealing with an individual whose extremism is *au fond* ideological.

The notion of an extremist whose extremism is not fundamentally ideological seems paradoxical but nevertheless deserves to be taken seriously. There is a parallel with discussions of the role of ideology in terrorism. As Horgan and Shayler (2026) point out, "a defining characteristic of terrorism is that it is ideologically motivated" but the question is "just how *much*" of a person's motivation needs to be ideological in nature for it to be considered terrorism (p. 11). The answer to this question appears to be 'not very much'. For some terrorists, ideological commitment "may be the primary driver of their initial involvement" (p. 14). For others, "it may not even be relevant" or merely "a byproduct of sustained engagement with fellow travelers" (p. 14). By the same token, we might distinguish between 'old school' extremists whose extremism is primarily ideological, those for whom ideology is irrelevant, and those whose ideological commitments are secondary when viewed in relation to their primary preoccupation with violence.

The obvious question raised by this approach is: how can there be an extremist for whom ideology is not relevant, given the assumption that a defining characteristic of extremism properly so called is that, like terrorism, it is ideologically motivated? The real significance of 'salad bar' extremism is that it casts doubt on this venerable assumption. For a theorist who wants to pursue the notion of non-ideological extremism, the challenge is to justify the application of the

term 'extremist' to someone who is not ideologically driven and whose violence lacks an ideological purpose. In the cases to which I want to draw attention, the key is that the putative extremist's violence is, to quote British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, violence "seemingly for its own sake" (Prime Minister's Office, 2025). This type of violence is a product of the extremist's *fixation* with violence and, in some cases, also their *valorization* of violence, their disposition to regard violence as valuable in itself, regardless of any other concrete purpose that it might serve.

An example of this type of extremist is Axel Rudakubana. In 2024, when he was not quite 18, he attacked a group of young girls at a dance class in Southport, England, killing three and wounding many others.

After his arrest, Rudakubana told police:

"I'm so glad those kids are dead. It makes me happy. I don't care. I'm feeling neutral. It's a good thing those children are dead. Literally such a good thing those kids are dead, six years old. I'm so glad the children are dead. So glad. Yeah I'm so happy. Six years old. It's a good thing they are dead, yeah." (The Southport Inquiry, 2026, p. 129).

These are not the words of someone whose violence was ideologically motivated. They are, rather, expressions of approval. He is not saying that the killings were necessary, or that they served some further grander purpose. He is saying that what happened was, in itself, *a good thing*. If this is extremism, it is not ideological in any standard sense of 'ideological'. The Southport Inquiry (2026) notes that "the police searched for and were unable to find any evidence of Rudakubana having pursued an ideological cause, whether political, religious or racial" (p. 244).

Why call Rudakubana an 'extremist'? Intuitively, an extremist is someone who occupies a position that "falls somewhere near the end or fringe of something close to a normal distribution" (Nozick, 1997, p. 296). Rudakubana's stance on the value and desirability of violence falls near the end of a normal distribution of stances on these issues. Pacifists are at one extreme,

and he is at the other.

However, it is not Rudakubana's *ideology* that makes him an extremist but rather his *evaluative posture*. He was not an *ideological* extremist, but a *value* extremist – an extremist with extreme values. There is no evidence of mixing of ideological content because his extremism has no ideological content. By the same token, he did not migrate from one ideology to another. For someone like him, the ideological goodies on offer in the salad bar are of no interest. He is therefore an extremist with no place in Horgan and Shayler's (2026) taxonomy because he is not someone who 'presents' with *any* ideology, let alone with multiple ideologies. He is more like the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. In the words of the movie, "Some men aren't looking for anything logical, like money. They can't be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn".

Why doesn't Rudakubana's evaluative stance – or the Joker's for that matter – count as ideological? Consider Scruton's (2007) characterization of 'ideology' as "any systematic and all-embracing political doctrine which claims to give a complete and universally applicable theory of man and society, and to derive therefrom a program of political action" (p. 250). It is sufficiently clear that Rudakubana's value extremism is not an ideology in this narrow political sense, but could it not count as an ideology in a broader sense of that term?

For example, suppose that an ideology is construed simply as any system of beliefs and values that orients behaviour. In that case, why should not value extremism count as a non-political form of ideological extremism? To begin with, not every system of beliefs and values that orients behavior is an ideology. A person might have systematic beliefs about the merits of different flavours of ice cream and attach supreme value to one flavour above all the others, but their ice cream beliefs and values do not constitute an ideology even if they influence their behavior.

Among the necessary conditions for a set of beliefs and values to qualify as an 'ideology', the first concerns their subject matter. Only beliefs

about certain subjects qualify as ideological. Although ideologies need not be political doctrines in Scruton's (2007) sense, they must nevertheless be concerned with what Geuss (1981) calls "central issues of human life" (p. 10). Beliefs about the merits of flavours of ice cream do not qualify. A second condition is generality. Ideological beliefs must be sufficiently wide or general in scope to count as 'world views' since this is how ideologies are most often described. A third standard condition is interconnectedness. An ideology is not a single belief or even a bundle of beliefs. It consists of a cluster of what Geuss (1981) calls "systematically interconnected" (p. 10) beliefs and values that have a discernible internal structure. A fourth condition is explanatory ambition. Ideologies are explanations of social or political reality rather than mere descriptions. As aptly described by Uscinski and Parent (2014), an ideology is "a set of interrelated beliefs that provide a way for people to understand the world (...). Without ideologies to categorize and interpret information, the world would be meaningless" (p. 12).

The case against treating Rudakubana as an ideological extremist is that his stance on the value of violence does not satisfy all four conditions on ideology. It might satisfy the first one if the value of violence is admitted to be a central question of human life, but it is questionable whether it satisfies the other three. A stable commitment to the intrinsic value of violence lacks the necessary generality, systematicity, and explanatory ambition. Doubtless it can be argued that the four conditions are still too restrictive and that there is an even looser conception of ideology on which his extremism might still count as ideological. However, there are three decisive reasons for not pursuing this line of thought.

The first is that the looser one's conception of ideology, the greater the risk of false positives, such as having to count a person's ice cream focused beliefs and values as amounting to an ideology. Violence focused beliefs are more plausible candidates for ideological status, but only as part of a network of interconnected beliefs with the appropriate wide scope.

The second is that in discussions of radicalization and the ideological causes of terrorism, the relevant notion of 'ideology' is at the more restrictive and more political end of the spectrum of views of ideology. It is telling that the Southport Inquiry Report describes the police as having found no evidence of Rudakubana having pursued an ideological cause. They certainly *did* find evidence that he valorized violence. In addition, he plainly displayed what the trial judge described in his Sentencing Note (Judiciary of England and Wales, 2025) as a "settled intention to carry out mass killing" (p. 5) and a "long-standing preoccupation with violent killing and genocide" (p. 5). The fact that the police, the judge, and the Inquiry Report nevertheless concurred that he did not act in pursuance of an ideological cause reflects their common-sense view that he was not an *ideological* extremist or terrorist in any accepted sense of 'ideological'. The fact that they did not feel the need to argue the point shows that they did not regard the point as controversial.

Thirdly, insisting on calling Rudakubana's extremism 'ideological' places it in the same conceptual or theoretical basket as more traditional forms of extremism that are very different from it in virtue of their political content. Even if Rudakubana's extremism is ideological in *some* sense, it is utterly different from the extremism of an ideologically motivated terrorist like Usman Khan, the Islamist terrorist who stabbed people in furtherance of a politico-religious cause on London Bridge in 2019. Describing Khan's extremism as ideological and Rudakubana's as non-ideological is an effective way to mark a real distinction between two very different types of extremism.

Despite this, could it not be argued that, for all we know, Rudakubana was on a *trajectory* towards ideological extremism? On this view, he was someone at an early stage of a radicalization process who had not yet adopted a coherent extremist ideology, but his grievance-fuelled extremism was only temporarily rather than constitutively non-ideological. This is always possible but as it stands this proposal is pure speculation. There is no evidence that he was a proto-ideological extremist rather than one

whose extremism was fundamentally non-ideological.

How does value extremism relate to what is nowadays called Nihilistic Violent Extremism (NVE)? There is a family resemblance but there are also significant differences. NVEs supposedly "engage in criminal conduct (...) in furtherance of political, social, or religious goals that derive primarily from a hatred of society at large and a desire to bring about its collapse by sowing indiscriminate chaos, destruction, and social instability" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2025). This definition fails to grasp the radical nature of new types of extremism. It is not at all obvious that the individuals concerned have political, social, or religious goals. If they did, they would be old school extremists. The goals of supposed NVEs derive from their desire for societal destruction or instability but someone like Rudakubana had no grander purpose, no big picture societal goal. What such people are primarily interested in is *violence*, not its consequences for society.

If one thinks of someone like Rudakubana from a psychological angle, what emerges is the picture of someone who was *fixated* on violence. He is, or was, a VFI – a violence fixated individual. In the words of the Southport Inquiry (2025), his online activities point to someone with a "violence fixated mindset" (p. 174) and "a deep and enduring preoccupation with extreme violence and the brutal death of others" (p. 244). In principle, a person can be a VFI even if they do not see violence as a good thing. It is possible to be fixated on something of which one does not approve. If this is right, then there are at least two versions of non-ideological extremism: value extremism, and the extremism of a VFI who commits acts of violence for their own sake, without any other purpose. In the latter case, their extremism consists in their psychological fixation and extreme behavior. As such, it is even more clearly non-ideological than value extremism.

This explains how it is possible for a person to be a violent extremist but not a terrorist. In the UK, terrorism must have the purpose of advancing a political, religious, racial, or ideological cause. The Sentencing Note (2025) makes it clear that this was the basis of the decision not to charge Rudakubana with terrorism (p. 6). He is (or was)

nevertheless an extremist because, unlike terrorism, extremism need not be political, religious, racial, or ideological. Indeed, it is possible to be a violent extremist without being committed to any *cause* other than violence itself, which is barely a cause at all in the absence of what Hall and Cassam (2025) call a “grander purpose” (p. 1). People like Rudakubana might even be described as a ‘no-cause’ extremists, which is not to say that their extreme acts are uncaused.

Old school extremism, including salad bar extremism, is necessarily ideological but extremism is not necessarily old school. There is also non-ideological extremism. Rudakubana is this type of extremist but not unique. Another example is Kim de Gelder, who stabbed several babies in the 2009 Dendermonde nursery attack in Belgium. In contrast, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two perpetrators of the Columbine High School massacre, did at least pretend to have acted for a cause, namely, human extinction. However, such a brazen attempt at what might be called ‘causeplaying’ should not be taken at face value. As increasing numbers of individuals – mainly young men – engage in extreme violence for its own sake or in pursuit of pseudo-causes, the standard conception of extremism as fundamentally ideological will come under greater pressure.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests

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